

Grace Lutheran Church
February 13, 2022 + Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Pastor Nancy Raabe: “Opposite Day” (Luke 6:17-26)

Apparently Jesus has decided it's Opposite Day. Blessed are the poor? Woe to the rich? What else are we to make of this?

Officially January 25 is Opposite Day each year, but anyone can declare it – all you have to do is go up to someone, for example, pay them a big compliment you don't mean, and then say, “Opposite Day!” Of course this contains an inherent paradox. If you say it's Opposite Day then it really isn't. That conundrum aside, doing or saying the opposite can either confuse people or it can work in your favor. Remember the Seinfeld episode where George Costanza abruptly decides to do the opposite of everything he'd normally do, and now because he's such a pleasant person he quickly gets a gorgeous new girlfriend?

Chances are, of course, Jesus isn't trying to confuse anyone. A lot has happened since we last saw him on the lakeshore: He has healed a leper, a paralytic, and a man with a withered hand. He scandalized the Pharisees by calling a tax collector to be a disciple and then he quickly gathered the rest of them. Now Jesus has just come down from the mountain after what must have been their orientation, and thousands, or maybe tens of thousands, are waiting for him on the plain in great excitement, pushing and jostling each other to get a better view. Electricity is in the air. They assume Jesus is about to make a big speech: “People of Judea! Your long wait is over! The Messiah is here at last!”

No – instead, he hits them with this seemingly contrary series of statements.

Did Jesus ever do anything according to expectation? His words and actions were always the opposite of what the world taught people to expect.

For one thing, he chose to deliver the biggest speech of his ministry so far not from a lofty pulpit but from level ground, where everyone else is. Everyone was literally on the same playing field.

Then, Jesus proclaimed blessings and curses not in the done-deal kind of way people were accustomed to thinking of them, such as in Jeremiah—cursed are those who trust in idols but blessed are those who trust in the Lord. Instead, Jesus was calling attention to where people stood in reference to God's kingdom at that moment, with the call to repentance always humming just beneath the surface.

This becomes clearer if we hear “Blessed are you” and “Woe to you” as, respectively, “You're on the right track” and “Watch out!” Here's how that would go:

- You who own nothing, you're on the right track. You are respectable; people will look up to you because, more than those with lots of possessions, you grasp that the kingdom of God belongs to you, a treasure beyond compare.

- You with no food, you're on the right track. People will look up to you because you know how vividly Jesus Christ satisfies the deepest human hunger, as the bread of life and spring of living water gushing up to eternal life.
- You who mourn the loss of loved ones, you are to be greatly admired for your fierce embrace of the truth of eternal life.
- You who are persecuted, you are to be greatly admired because all who proclaim the truth experience such persecutions and, like them, you will receive your reward.

BUT:

- Watch out! you to whom your personal wealth means everything, because when the bottom falls out you will find yourself with nothing at all.
- Watch out, you whose hunger is fully satisfied, because things can turn around suddenly, you will know hunger like you never imagined, and you won't be able to handle it.
- Watch out, you who spend your days in merriment, because sorrow lurks just around the corner.
- And watch out, you who love to be complimented and flattered, because that is what people do when they loathe you but can't tell you to your face.

The danger of this interpretation that we are quick to condemn anyone who has money, or who seems to be a merry sort of person, or who once welcomed a compliment when you thought it might have been more tactful for them to protest. Remember, it is not money but LOVE of money that is the root of all evil, not happiness that is a hindrance to discipleship but the incapacity to be in solidarity with those who are suffering.

What we can take from this experience of Opposite Day is the reminder that Jesus' entire ministry is based on reorientation, on an upside-down version of what human community is and how we measure success. The values that the world teaches us to love—wealth, status, power, prestige, the number of followers, the number of retweets, the number of views—count for nothing in the kingdom of God. What does count? As Paul said, only Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Our call is to live by kingdom values, which means a radical reorientation of how we think about EVERYTHING. A good example is the Biden administration's plan to ship 500 million free coronavirus testing kits to Americans. At first glance it's a wonderful idea. But instead of making it a priority to well equip those at higher risk, who live in multigenerational households or work in essential jobs where the pandemic has hit hardest, the decision was made to ship four to each household.

Another example is the general devaluation of seniors in our culture. Kingdom living calls for us to hold our elder members in higher regard, not lower. Consider the beautiful image a tree of Psalm 1, with roots planted deep to drink in God's life-giving Word. I have witnessed countless examples of almost super-human endurance that comes from this deep rooting, seniors who have endured pain and hardship and loss to an extent that younger or weaker souls cannot even imagine. Oh, you people of faith, you are to be greatly admired! Let us look to them for wisdom as we also put down our roots to soak up sacred scripture, so that we also may stand upright when the day of the Lord comes. Amen.